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Oral history interview with Maurice Gesundheit

Summary

Maurice Gesundheit, born in 1906 in Warsaw, Poland, discusses arriving in Paris in 1925; his parents were already living in Paris; at the declaration of war, he was a student; his father had been in Paris since 1900 and returned to Warsaw to marry; Maurice was born in Warsaw and his brother was born in France; the first round-up on 14th of May 1941 in the 11th arrondissement of Paris; he was then taken to Pithiviers; there was the notion that Pithiviers is not the worse, but the worse is yet to come; they were then deported to Birkenau in cattle wagons on the 23rd of July 1941; Birkenau was undergoing construction at the time of their arrival; the gas chambers and the crematoriums were still in construction; as Maurice describes, it was another world; there was a silence of death there; he began to work at the camp, transporting soil; he then had the opportunity to go to a building school where he would begin work as a bricklayer; briefly, Maurice had the chance to change his commando where he was told to begin work copying all of the names of the Jews who had died from a "heart attacks" ("crise cardiaque"); however, he was soon told to return to the building school where he continued to work as a bricklayer; Maurice was then transferred to Auschwitz where they were finally given the striped clothing; he stayed at Auschwitz until the evacuation in 1944; at Auschwitz, he was an instructor for building and bricklaying; in the "school," he was with Gypsies of 12-13 years old, Ukrainians, Greek Jews, and Italians; most did not return; after the evacuation, the school was closed; Maurice also describes a selection process that took place of just the Jews; when a Jew was too weak to work or walk, he was placed in what they called the "himmel-commando" (the commando of the sky) and they were sent to the gas chambers; Maurice then continues to describe a regular day at Auschwitz (from morning till night); the building school existed until the end of 1944; at the end of January 1945, they were en route to Buchenwald; they eventually arrived at Buchenwald; they were liberated from Buchenwald in early April of 1945; Maurice describes the liberation and his subsequent return to Paris; on the return journey, they drove through Germany; he describes a handful interactions with local Germans; his wife, who was also deported, was very sick when she returned to Paris; he describes the process of regaining his apartment which had been given to a French chef for the Germans; Maurice had to undergo a legal process to get the apartment back; the population of Paris had various reactions to the return of the Jews; Maurice describes these reactions in detail; some Parisians were enthusiastic; others were not too pleased; finally, Maurice provides his perspective on the fate of future generations and the transmission of this event to those generations.

English summary provided by Ethan T. Ashley